

# FOREIGNERS IN CHINA

LIVING THEIR DREAMS

CCTV-4  
Foreigners in China Program



25 PEOPLE FROM FIVE CONTINENTS  
TELLING THEIR TRUE STORIES



NEW WORLD PRESS

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By CCTV-4 Foreigners in China Program

Translated by Ai Yang

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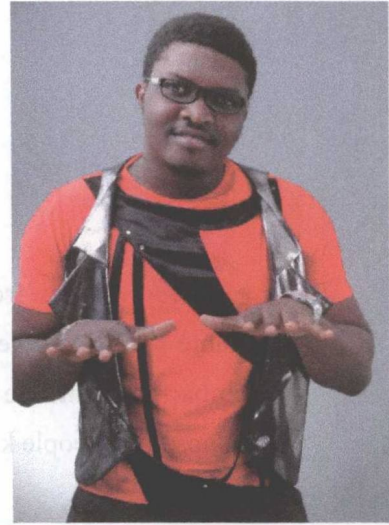
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## Hao Di, Star of “Red Songs”



*He* comes from Africa. He has loved music since childhood. He came to China when he was 22. His overnight success was followed by embarrassment. He sings red songs, learns Chinese, and experiences hardships. Few people know what he has gone through behind the scenes.

Hao Di comes from Nigeria, Africa. He is a member of the Five Continents Band. After the band won the fourth place at the annual contest of CCTV's *Star Way*, Hao Di became famous. He has received endless invitations to perform across China. Hao Di has become very busy since then but he never felt tired.

Hao Di: Singing on stage is my happiest moment. I can't think of anything other than that. Singing on stage makes me the happiest. But of course it's exhausting sometimes because you have to go to so many cities. Your life then is mostly about going to the airport from home, boarding the plane, landing, going to the hotel. That has become the life.

Yan Yi: But you do enjoy the moment in the spotlight?

Hao Di: Yes. For example, sometimes if I take a break for four to five days, then I start to feel it's becoming boring. Where is the stage? I want my stage, where is it?

## In the Beginning

Hao Di was born in Lagos, Nigeria, 1985. He has six siblings and ranks the fourth himself. Hao Di's father is a pastor and enjoys an income that's considered middle class locally. Hao Di loved singing as a child and his talent showed. In 2005 he graduated as a psychology major, but it was hard to find a job with it in Lagos. He didn't want to become a burden on the family and started singing in pubs. At the time his elder brother, Hao Ge, had already become a professional singer in China, and he invited him to come to China and look for a bigger stage.

Hao Di found his first stage in a pub in Houhai in Beijing. Many young music lovers come to Houhai for their dreams. There're so many different pubs of different sizes and styles just along the several hundred meters of the street in Houhai. Hao Di became one of the singers there and performed in a pub.

Back then he was nobody, and he sang on a tiny stage. But to him it was a special stage. It witnessed his dream, hard work and perseverance. He had to sing more than 20 songs every night at the time. Even now whenever he returns to his old stage, he would still sing some of his favorites.

Yan Yi: How much did you make a night?

Hao Di: About 300 yuan.

Yan Yi: 300.

Hao Di: Yes.

Yan Yi: That's quite something, so every month you would make...

Hao Di: No, but it depends [on how you spend it]. Back then I didn't know how to take the bus or subway. I only knew how to hail taxis. It cost me about 100 yuan a day taking taxis, and the money was just gone like that.



Hao Di's daily expenditure was high, as he didn't understand Chinese. Also he didn't have a habit of saving money and spent carelessly. In the end he didn't save much, even with such a high income.

Hao Di got his first important opportunity in 2008, and it was a turning point for him. He joined the Five Continents Band. It's a band made up of musicians from five continents. When Hao Di joined, the band was about to enter the CCTV's *Star Way* contest. In the annual contest the band won the fourth place. Hao Di didn't know that this contest had made him famous and got him Chinese fans. He became a little big-headed, and the band leader, Yu Xin, noticed.

Yu Xin: He gave me a very bad impression. For example, when the band traveled on the train, everybody carried a lot of luggage. As a man I felt obliged to help the girls, so I would carry mine and theirs. Hao Di is pretty tall and has long legs, but he always marched ahead himself. I was pretty mad at him. I think he used to keep to himself quite a bit. He wasn't very open-hearted to others.

Hao Di didn't know how to get along with the band at the time. He didn't realize that his popularity gained from *Star Way* alone was not going to help in the long run. More importantly, Hao Di couldn't really navigate through life in China with his language ability at the time. All he knew was several Chinese songs.

Hao Di: Once I went to the supermarket to buy the thing I use in the shower. What do you call it?

Yan Yi: Shower gel.

Hao Di: Right, and when I went there, I saw a bottle that looked about right. It got Chinese all over it and I couldn't read, so I bought it and went home. When I showered with it, I felt something was not right.

Yan Yi: What was it?

Hao Di: It was shampoo. I couldn't speak any Chinese and had to use body language for everything, like buying water and rice. I had no ways.

Even with so many difficulties in life, Hao Di didn't think it was important to learn Chinese until he failed a gig on a performance trip. It hit him hard.

Hao Di: I sang an English song first. After the first song, guests started leaving one by one.

Yan Yi: All of them left?

Hao Di: Yeah. They all started leaving, and I was like, oh, this is big, big trouble. The pub owner then said, let him go.

Hao Di didn't get paid for the gig, and the owner refused to pay for his return ticket. He ended up spending the only 200 yuan he had and got on a bus back to Beijing.

Hao Di: The isle on the bus was very narrow and I am pretty tall. It was a very, very uncomfortable night on the bus. When I woke up, my legs were numb. Once I returned to Beijing, I started wondering if I should continue this singing career.

This was a heavy blow to Hao Di. Being far away from home and not knowing the language frustrated him and even made him question his dream.

He suddenly started to miss his mother and his sweet home in Africa.

Hao Di: I was very lonely and I had no friends. I had no one to talk to. Everybody went home after work and I was by myself. When I got tired from playing on the computer, I would wander around. I looked at the stars and wandered outside. I had no friends. I guess this is how loneliness feels.

Hao Di was thinking about quitting after a year of difficulties. His visa was about to expire soon, and he needed to reapply in Nigeria. But he didn't have the 20,000 needed for this return trip. It was at this time Old Yu (Yu Xin) from the company gave him a helping hand.

Hao Di: Old Yu lent me the money for a return trip to Africa.

Yan Yi: How much did he give you?

Hao Di: About 60,000 or 70,000 yuan.

Yu Xin: To be honest I was nervous. I wasn't worried he wasn't going to pay me back but that he might not be able to come back.

Yan Yi: But you still lent it to him?

Yu Xin: Well, yeah. Life is a gamble. If he really couldn't make it back, then the money would be gone.

Hao Di returned home to Nigeria with a heavy heart after a year and half in China. Instead of a welcoming mother and a warm hug, to his surprise Hao Di was met with reprimand from mother.

Hao Di: She asked me how I did and what I learnt in China, and then she found out I didn't learn anything. She was very angry and reprimanded me severely. I guess I could say that her reprimand put some sense into me.

Yan Yi: So what did your mother say that touched you?

Hao Di: She said you have to be very clear about what you want, and why you go to this country. You go to a country that doesn't speak English, how can you not know to learn their language? Then I thought I was wrong.

Hao Di reflected himself deeply after the talk with his mother. Looking back on his persistence at first in China, and his arrogant attitude after he got fame, he started to realize he was wrong. He didn't want to lose such a big stage just like that. One month later, Hao Di returned to China. He was going to make it this time with all his efforts.

### Going Back to China

Hao Di: When I left my brother's place I didn't have a house to stay. I lived in the company. There was a couch about 1.5 meters long and I'm 1.86 meters high. It was very uncomfortable for me. I don't sleep on the couch anymore. I used to have fried rice every day and slept poorly back then. I couldn't speak Chinese, and I felt very bad and very sad.

Hao Di moved out of his brother's home after returning to China. He decided to face the life he chose himself. When he first returned, the thing that was on his mind the most was how to repay Old Yu, and he took many performance invitations from companies of all sizes. Old Yu saw this and often introduced him to opportunities. Hao Di's colleagues at work often called him stingy, but he never minded that. They didn't know that apart from repaying Old Yu, he also had to send money home to Africa.

After a year, Hao Di paid back the 70,000 yuan he owed Old Yu. During



that time he also improved his Chinese. Now, thanks to his colleagues, he speaks fluent Mandarin.

Yan Yi: So you were going to study Mandarin hard after returning to China?

Hao Di: That's right. There weren't that many focused teachings on Chinese at the time, and I bought a small handbook and taught myself. I used the computer at work to translate what I didn't understand.

Yu Xin: We wouldn't speak English when Hao Di was around, not even a word of it. Everybody spoke to him in Chinese.

Hao Di: I would be anxious, and I'd learn slowly. The Chinese I learnt today I learnt from the Chinese people around me. I didn't have a professional teacher.

Living in a world using Chinese only, Hao Di improved rapidly. He started to mingle with people and got along better with people around him.

Yan Yi: He started carrying bags for you.

Yu Xin: Not for me but for the girls. They must have been really happy that Hao Di changed. They would rub his head and say, good, good. I could see that when Hao Di smiled it was from the bottom of his heart. It was like that.

Yan Yi: He gradually came to his senses.

Yu Xin: Slowly, yes. Then he began to offer me help. He'd ask me to let him carry the heavy ones. Now he's full of sunshine. He has many friends now. He used to only play with us few and never went out. He didn't have money back then, and now he goes out with so many different friends and doesn't see us at all! (laugh)

## The Red Songs

Once he opened up to people, Hao Di made more friends. Many people have



given him good suggestions and some even recommended him songs. Once he listened to a red song at a friend's place by chance and was immediately enchanted by the deep feelings and strong enthusiasm of the singers. He had never tried singing this kind of song, and now he was tempted. (video soundbite)

Yan Yi: The Chinese audience began to know you because you started singing red songs. How many hits did you get on the first day when you put your video online?

Hao Di: About two million.

Yan Yi: With two million hits did you think you would become famous?

Hao Di: I never thought I would be famous one day, and especially not in China. What's good about being a singer? All of this was very sudden. I never thought about it.

Hao Di became popular because of the red songs, and he became more passionate about singing red songs. But as a foreigner he didn't know the history behind those songs, and didn't understand the significance. In China the red songs refer to those that sing praises to the revolutions and the motherland. Many of the stories sang of in the red songs carry historic meanings. Once in a contest, Hao Di's confidence was met with doubt from the judges, as he didn't understand what was behind those songs.

Hao Di: I remember once I was singing *Azalea*. The song is familiar to everybody, and because it is a slow song, so when I sang I thought I should dance to it. When I sang I turned around in a circle and continued. Everybody thought it was interesting and clapped. I thought it was great. After the song the judge criticized me. Mr. Yan Su said, “Hao Di, you can't do this. Do you know what you're singing?” I said, yes, I know. Its *Azalea*. He said, “What kind



of a song is *Azalea*? This is a serious song, and you should be when you sing.” I was surprised. I thought the notes were long [and I could dance to them]. He said I was supposed to be serious and shouldn’t have danced to it. That was not OK. He criticized me.

Yan Su's words enlightened Hao Di. During the two months of the contest Hao Di listened to red songs every day. In order to understand everything, he asked his colleagues relentlessly. He watched those films and tried to understand the meaning word by word.

Hao Di: From then on I started to work hard on it. If I decided to sing a red song in a contest, I would find out its theme and watch the film. I would ask a Chinese person to explain the film to me, so when I sang myself I would be in the right mood.

Yan Yi: You started to learn about the stories behind the songs?

Hao Di: Yes.

Through constant learning, Hao Di has grown to love Chinese songs more and more. He became even good at the Chinese opera. His hard work has been recognized, and more and more people got to know Hao Di, a young African man who loves singing Chinese songs.

Now Hao Di's schedule has become tighter, and there're more and more shows. He said he enjoyed and cherished every opportunity to perform, because it hadn't been easy. His income has risen, but he has kept the habit of frugality. This is a supermarket that he comes to often, and he's now very familiar with the owner. He asked her to pick vegetables for him, and out of habit he would haggle when paying. This is also a skill he picked up in China. Hao Di likes to cook for himself when he's in between shows. His favorite is fried rice, something that helped him through the hardest times.

Hao Di has spent six years in China since 2007. He was a reckless young man and now has become a star. He has always dreamt about expressing the past six years with a song. It's the most memorable time of his life, and it motivates him to become better. His wish is about to come true. The song *The Black Brother*, based on Hao Di's experiences, is soon to be released.

Hao Di: If you like something, be it singing or doing businesses, you have to keep doing it. No matter how difficult the road is, you have to persist. It will become better.

Written by Tian Wenwen

Interviewed by Yan Yi



## **“Australian Dad” Justin Anemaat**